

COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW  
July/August 1985

FILE ON

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 67

# UNFINISHED BUSINESS

## Who's deceiving whom?

### TO THE REVIEW:

When a journalist sets out to accuse government officials of lying and other deceptions he should take pains to make sure of his own facts. Anthony Marro, I fear, made some

serious errors in "When Government Tells Lies" (CJR, March/April). The following list is not necessarily exhaustive, but it is indicative of carelessness. I won't accuse Marro of lying.

□ Marro suggests that President Reagan was wrong when he said that there were enough arms found on Grenada to supply thousands of terrorists. He said that reporters "found some of the warehouses half-empty . . . and many of the weapons antiquated, possibly more suited for defense by an island militia than for the export of revolution and terrorism."

According to the Defense Department's list of weapons found on Grenada, there were 1,626 Soviet AK47 assault rifles, 1,120 model 52 Czech rifles, 4,074 KS rifles, and 2,432 Mosin Nagent 7.6 mm Soviet rifles. There were many other rifles, plus machine guns and mortars. These numbers would seem to justify President Reagan's statement. It is possible that Marro was misled about the antiquity of the rifles by a story by *Washington Post* reporter Loren Jenkins which said that some of the rifles were .30-30 Marlin carbines made in 1870. That story was discredited when arms experts pointed out that no such Marlins were made in 1870 and .30-30 ammunition was not introduced until 1895. Unfortunately, *The Washington Post* never acknowledged this error.

□ Marro writes that "the Reagan administration insisted that its changes in the Social Security Disability law were intended only to get rid of people who had no right to the government aid in the first place." He is evidently referring to an amendment to the law that was passed by Congress in 1980, during the Carter administration, in response to a GAO investigation which showed that billions of dollars were being paid to individuals whose claims to disability were fraudulent. Congress required that the recipients of disability benefits be checked and the

cases of fraud weeded out. Marro is incorrect in attributing this change in the law to the Reagan administration. It did, however, implement the law, and, because of the protests that were amply reported in the media, Congress asked that safeguards in the review process be introduced to reduce the hardship on persons whose benefits were cut off without adequate justification. Marro was perhaps misled by the impression created by Bill Moyers's documentary "People Like Us"

that the change in the law was part of the Reagan budget cutbacks. This error was pointed out to CBS, but it never did anything to correct the misleading impression on the air.

□ Marro attacks the State Department's 1981 white paper on El Salvador on the basis of an article by Jonathan Kwitny published in *The Wall Street Journal* in June 1981. He writes that Kwitny "found the evidence [of outside aid to the Salvadoran guerrillas] something less than it had been made out to be." Marro is apparently unaware of the fact that it has been demonstrated that Kwitny did not himself make any discoveries about the white paper. Philip Agee, the CIA defector, charged that Kwitny's article had been cribbed from his analysis of the white paper without giving him any credit, or even mentioning his name. A comparison of Kwitny's article and Agee's work shows that there was indeed a close correspondence between the two. Even some of Agee's errors showed up in Kwitny's piece. Kwitny acknowledged having seen Agee's article. He said he was unaware that it had had any distribution except to a few old friends of Agee's.

There were some errors in the white paper, to be sure, but neither the criticisms of Kwitny nor of Robert Kaiser of *The Washington Post* discredited its basic findings, and both the Cubans and Nicaraguans have subsequently admitted that they were giving substantial aid to the guerrillas in El Salvador during the period covered by the white paper.

Where was the more significant deception — in the white paper or in articles by Kwitny and Kaiser, both of whom leaned heavily on Agee without giving him proper credit?

REED IRVINE  
Chairman  
Accuracy in Media  
Washington, D.C.

Anthony Marro replies: *Except for the AK-47 assault rifles, all of the weapons listed by Irvine are classified by Jane's Infantry Weapons (1982-83 edition) as being "obsolete." According to Jane's, the Mosin Nagent rifles are "not found in first-line service with any regular army," the Czech Model 52s are no longer in service in Czechoslovakia, and the Soviet KS rifles are no longer used in the Soviet Union "except for ceremonial purposes."*

*Irvine is right in saying that Congress, during the Carter administration, mandated a review of Social Security disability rolls. What I was referring to by "changes" were the new criteria set by the Reagan administration — criteria that congressional oversight committees and federal judges have since found went well beyond any mere weed-*

*ing out of fraudulent claims and instead resulted in a wholesale purge of the rolls. Senator John Heinz characterized the Reagan administration's review process as being "out of control," adding that "Congress simply did not intend for American workers who had paid into this system and were entitled to benefits to be removed from the rolls in this insane fashion."*

*Irvine has contended for several years that Agee's criticisms of the so-called white paper were a source of information, and possibly a source of inspiration, for Kwitny and The Wall Street Journal. I was aware of this when I wrote the piece, just as I was familiar with the long rebuttal by Frederick Taylor, the executive editor of the Journal, which was published in August 1981. Kwitny has said that he had a copy of Agee's critique, but that the main sources of information were the State Department documents themselves and the officials who were quoted in his article. The point of Kwitny's piece was not that the State Department's claim that arms were being shipped into El Salvador was in error, but only that its "evidence" was much less solid than it first was made out to be.*